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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 000893

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: THAILAND: LARGE-SCALE RED MARCH PLANNED FOR APRIL
8, BUT TO WHAT END?

REF: BANGKOK 865

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Classified By: DCM James F. Entwistle, reason 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary and Comment: The red-shirts' self-proclaimed "D-Day" rally set for April 8 may bring upwards of 100,000 opponents of the current Thai government into the streets of Bangkok, though privately one key red leader acknowledges the crowd may not top 50,000. The red-shirts' stated demands -- PM Abhisit should resign, Privy Councilors Prem, Surayud, and Pichit should resign -- are unattainable by such street action alone. The unknown factor at this point is whether the red-shirts will engage in acts of violence -- either spontaneous or planned -- and how/whether Thai security forces will respond. In a worrisome sign, a small group of red-shirt protesters in Pattaya attacked PM Abhisit's car April 7 after it stalled at an intersection. PM Abhisit appeared on national TV late April 6 to affirm the right of peaceful protest but to warn that authorities would not allow the situation to get out of hand. We have emphasized directly to both fugitive former PM Thaksin and red-shirt leaders in recent days the need to keep the red protests peaceful (reftel). End Summary and Comment.

Red D-Day on April 8?

¶2. (SBU) The opposition street protests led by the United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), commonly known as "red-shirts," started a blockade of Government House March 26 with about 30,000 supporters, promising nightly video appearances by fugitive former PM Thaksin and new revelations about Thaksin's enemies. The red-shirts have been pushing a four point agenda: resignation of PM Abhisit and his government; resignation of Privy Councilors Prem, Surayud, and Pichit; the dissolution of parliament and the calling of new elections; and constitutional amendments. An additional recent demand is a general amnesty covering all charges against politicians since the September 19, 2006 coup through May 5, 2009, widely seen as a way of allowing Thaksin and his cohort to return to political life in Thailand.

¶3. (C) Numbers of red-shirt supporters attending the rallies quickly melted away after the initial weekend, albeit with brief surges each evening. There were less than 1000 during

the day April 4 and no more than 6000 for the April 6 evening rally. With interest flagging, UDD leaders set a new rallying point prior to the traditional Thai New Year's celebration of Songkhran April 13-15, calling supporters to join a massive "D-Day" rally April 8, and announcing an intent to branch out from Government House and march on the nearby house of Privy Council Chair Prem (note: a previous UDD march on Prem's house in May 2007 turned violent. End note). Initial brash public red-shirt predictions of a crowd of 300,000 seem unlikely. UDD co-leader Vira Musikapong suggested to us March 31 that he hoped 100,000 might attend, a number most frequently cited in media coverage; Vira told a reliable contact on April 3 that the crowd might not top 40,000-50,000.

What do they hope to achieve?

14. (C) It remains unclear exactly what red-shirt leaders hope to achieve with the April 8 rally. Vira told us March 31 the goals were to force the resignations of Abhisit, Prem and Surayud, and that protesters would march on Prem's residence.

However, Vira admitted the chances of such resignations occurring due to the rally alone were minimal. Absent realistic, achievable goals, there has been some speculation about ulterior motives, such as committing small acts of violence which could be used to provoke an overreaction by security forces, tipping momentum in the red-shirts' favor. UDD co-leader Jakkrapob has told some contacts privately that he favors instigating small acts of violence in hopes of triggering an overreaction by security forces, which in turn would give momentum to red calls for systemic change. Over the past week, we have warned Jakkrapob, Vira, and even Thaksin against any incitement of violence on April 8.

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Government response

15. (SBU) To counter such concerns, and a growing sense among some government supporters that the RTG had no coherent plan to meet the latest red challenge, PM Abhisit went on national TV late April 6 to offer reassurances that the government would allow legal, peaceful demonstrations and seek compromise with protesters, but also that it would protect state buildings and not allow "civil war or a people's revolution" to unfold. Abhisit also warned protesters to leave Prem's house alone. As of mid-day April 7, there appeared to be more police around Prem's residence than at the Government House compound one kilometer away; more worrisome, according to a reliable embassy contact who surveyed Prem's residence, was the presence too of the so-called Sri Vichaya warriors, the informal blackshirt militia of the PAD involved with street rumbles with red-shirts on September 2 and with police in front of parliament October 7, 2008.

Pattaya prelude to a rocky day?

16. (SBU) On the eve of the Bangkok march, the red-shirts showed a willingness to use more aggressive tactics, including violence, leading to growing concerns about what might happen April 8. Abhisit chaired the weekly Tuesday Cabinet meeting in Pattaya April 7 at the site of the upcoming April 10-12 ASEAN 3 and East Asian Summit meetings; roughly 1000 redshirts picketed the hotel, some penetrating the security line. After Abhisit departed the hotel site, his official BMW sedan stalled at an intersection. As he switched to his security detail's trailing SUV, a group of 30 red-shirts reportedly attempted to assault Abhisit; they used various materials at hand to smash the disabled BMW.

JOHN